

# IMPRESSIONS OF THE TEACHING METHODS OF CALEB GATTEGNO

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## 和文要旨

カレブガテーニョ（1911—1988）は、興味深い教育理念を研究開発しました。

このアプローチを言語教育に応用したもののが Silent Way とよばれています。

教師が Silent Way アプローチを用いることにより、学生が今何を学んでいるかを刻一刻把握することができ、同時に、学生が主体的にクラスを創造していけるような自主性をもたせることが可能です。

本論文では外国語教育における、ガテーニョのアプローチについて考察し、その利点と共に問題点を指摘します。

Caleb Gattegno's approach to education and learning - called The Silent Way approach when applied to the teaching of foreign languages - is not one that sits easily with traditional educational bookkeeping, testing and evaluating practices. There are no textbooks or lesson plans, little credence given to linguistic theories and no examinations. It can therefore be quite difficult to quantify the results of such an approach. However, as a testimony to its efficacy, its practitioners often swear an almost religious (and at times off-putting) allegiance to it, so powerful and long-lasting do they feel its results to be.

In the Silent Way great emphasis is placed on the moment in hand, the present instant. Gattegno argues that as human beings our historical way of learning -

how we acquire our skills in babyhood - involves a complete involvement with what is happening at the very time of learning - and that this is the best and the only way that we really learn.

It must be said that it quickly becomes quite difficult to examine Gattegno's ideas, as he and his followers are extremely particular and precise about the terms they use, redefining and narrowing down words that encompass a broad area of meaning, such as knowledge, awareness, memory, experience, consciousness and learning. So, discussing these issues in detail without having first negotiated an agreement as to the meanings attached to the words, can become a purposeless exercise. Bearing this in mind, I do not pretend to do more in this short paper than present a very general overview of the Silent Way, with some comments on its application in the teaching environment and on its effects on those participating, both as claimed by practitioners and as observed by myself in a three day seminar given by one of its leading practitioners, Roslyn Young. My hope is that this overview may throw some light on teacher-student relationships within the classroom and on how these can be improved.

One of Gattegno's most basic demands, as I understand it, is of acute and astute observation. In educational terms, this observation is applied by the teacher on the student: the teacher is the observer; the student, the observed. The teacher's first, most important and, in fact, continual task is to observe the student and respond accordingly. Since it is not possible to foresee in any detail how each student is going to behave from moment to moment within the classroom, such knowledge being only acquired at the time the learning is taking place, the lesson plan and textbook (traditional symbols of control in the classroom) very quickly become redundant. This does not mean that the control itself is abandoned. Those points of reference may have been laid aside, but in the Silent Way a new framework is very quickly put into place. Control, and sometimes a very tight control, still

remains, although the context may have changed. Silent Way teachers would argue that this control, this discipline of learning, is in fact crucial in order to ensure that something is in fact learnt.

One of the Silent Way teacher's first jobs is to discover the borderline between what students can do well on their own and what they are unable as yet to accomplish. And Gattegno argues that it is at this borderline that the teacher (and the student) should be working. The learning process consists of a continual returning to this area - the exact location of which shifts as the students' language improves. It is a fragile balance - take the students too far from what they know and they will be quickly lost, discouraged and unable to absorb anything of value; too far the other way, and they will only be repeating what they have already learnt, will become bored, will not advance and again will be discouraged. The teacher needs to observe the students' progress along this borderline and guide them back to it when they start to stray. Evidence of discouragement on the students' part therefore becomes a very useful pointer as it helps the teacher recognise when the class has moved too far from that crucial borderline. And it is not so difficult to return to this area. Whatever a student utters, there is always something the teacher can help with: the correct pronunciation, energy patterns, intonation and melody of a phrase/utterance in the language studied.

A student's mistakes therefore become an essential part of learning and are positively welcomed by the teacher. Gattegno calls them "gifts to the class", for it is these very mistakes which help define the boundaries of the class, and provide the students and teachers with a clear area within which they can work. But it is the students who must work on the mistakes, not the teacher - a Silent Way teacher rarely or never models or provides a correct answer for the students (hence the word "silent"). Instead, she encourages the students to pick up on their own, and at times each other's, mistakes through the use of (usually non-verbal) prompts

and subtle signs.

Arriving at the correct and perfect answer is not what is important in this approach. In fact, particularly in pronunciation work, if the students think they have reached perfection before they have (and it is a rare non-native speaker that achieves perfect native-sounding pronunciation) then there is a real danger that the wrong sounds will be automatised, at which stage correction becomes very very difficult. The teacher's aim then is to help keep the language learning process fluid, so that the students are always working towards the right answers in the long rather than the short term, thus giving them more chance of arriving at the authentic English sound.

The consequent release from the requirement to find the "right" answer leaves the students free to be more adventurous and bold, and the students' greater readiness to explore the language also frees the teacher up from being the main initiator. The teacher is then able to focus more fully on acting as a source of feedback as the students continue trying out the language. All she needs to do is respond, albeit in a way that demands great sensitivity and good judgment. She has in fact become a resource. She still retains certain duties, but it is the students who must produce the language which they themselves then work on. The teacher remains focussed on the students, not on the language, guiding and encouraging them as they work. She no longer has sole responsibility in the running of the classroom - at least half of this responsibility now belongs to the students (and gradually this will become more than half). The students become the ones constructing the sentences, not the teacher. As a result, the students soon learn to be responsible for what they say.

Because the students are now taking a lead, it is only natural that the places to which they go are of interest to themselves. Thus, the lessons become very

pleasurable for them. Problems such as inattention, sleepiness, boredom, absenteeism are reduced. And, as they gradually understand, perhaps subconsciously at times, that the classroom and the teacher's skills are at their disposal and not the reverse, they will begin to draw on them more and more. The teacher will feel stretched and used. Too often a teacher's sometimes immense skills and knowledge of a language are laid to waste as the whole class, teacher and student, struggle through page after page of someone else's textbook. But if the teacher is prepared to withdraw and let the students explore the language, becoming simply a guide, then this resistance is reduced, and the students often become quite naturally chatty. Instead of getting tired and "working" in a class, the participants will be rewarded with a stimulating, enjoyable exchange.

It can be hard, and even nerve-wracking, for a teacher to relinquish the leadership of the content of the class, but once she begins, the benefits very quickly become evident. With the lifting of the strain that can occur when forcing students to work to a preordained system that may not suit or interest them, the teacher's condition automatically improves, and she will experience a sense of relief and freedom.

### **So goes the theory.**

In practice it must be admitted that the usual methods of the Silent Way language teacher carry their own very clear restrictions. There may be talk of the need for Silent Way teachers to remain open and flexible, but it would not do to take this as the total truth. The limits imposed in a Silent Way lesson are as strict as any in a more traditional classroom - perhaps stricter, particularly for the teacher, who of course has taken the choice of imposing these limits upon herself. The efficacy of the approach depends on the students going along with initial premise that the teacher is there to set what are new and unfamiliar parameters - if this is not

accepted, then the students may become frustrated and discouraged and the Silent Way is in trouble.

Criticism and correction still exist, albeit reduced to mime or hand signals instead of verbal reproofs. And subtler means make for subtler awareness. As students adjust to the new form of communication and become more sensitive to it, it is easy to imagine that such reproofs can be as damaging to a student's confidence and sense of well-being as verbal ones, causing a similar degree of frustration and discouragement. It depends on the way in which the teacher performs and on the relationship between teacher and student, much the same as in a traditional classroom. (Though Silent Way teachers would argue that if the responses of the teacher are taken by the students as disapproving and damaging reproofs, then real Silent Way work is not taking place at all.)

Equally, although much can be learned from the Silent Way model, the lifting of strain and the consequent "feel-good" factor as the students take more responsibility for their learning is an event that can happen in any teaching situation - it is not a monopoly of the Silent Way. Any teacher worth their salt works towards giving the students more and more autonomy. And most people, one would hope, have had experience of teachers like this, working within all sorts of disciplines, using any number of approaches or methods. Here, we are talking about as much a question of attitude and personality as teaching technique.

An often repeated Silent Way maxim is that the students work on the language and the teacher works on the students. But if one observes a lesson closely it is clear that the teacher is very much aware of the language too. She is, indirectly, also working on the language and her actions are prompted by what is spoken. This is necessarily so. Too many mistakes, or too quick an abandonment of difficult constructions could lead the class out of that crucial borderline area - and

are in fact signals of the need to act. Just as in other teaching situations, the Silent Way teacher needs to be continually aware of what is happening with the language, which presupposes a very skilled knowledge of the language on her part. And she needs to strive continually to manoeuvre the students into a position where they too will realise what is happening with the language (and so can work on correcting themselves). The difference between the Silent Way and other teaching methods is that in the Silent Way the teacher is also expected to achieve this realisation on the students' part without them being consciously aware of the process. She is expected to be very underhand!

This is not to say that a certain degree of underhandedness cannot be extremely helpful. In the case of Japanese university students, who typically have a good knowledge of English but are unable to speak, there is an urgent need to focus on the present task of speaking. They need to be stopped from drifting off into the quagmires of lists of verbs, nouns, conjugations, grammar rules, exceptions and so on that they have memorised and regurgitated with such perfection in examination conditions, but which are of little use in a speaking situation. They need to be ambushed from their predetermined position of what the speaking of English entails. They need to be dissuaded from first forming the words and sentences in their minds and then editing and re-editing before they speak. There are a variety of ways of doing this. The Silent Way is but one, albeit a very efficient and logical method. Silent Way teachers, as we have seen above, train themselves to be experts at such ambush.

For those students whose speaking skills are slow to develop, Gattegno's colour/sound chart can be so helpful - there are no written symbols on the chart and so they immediately start to experience the spoken language as separate from the page. And the Silent Way teacher very often uses a pointer (an extendable metal stick) which is continually moving from sound to sound or word to word

in the different sound or word charts. This forces the students to experience directly, as they follow the pointer and speak, the ephemeral nature of spoken language.

The pointer absolves the teacher of the need to speak, as do the Silent Way's twelve (for the English language) word charts which hold all the basic words needed to construct any sentence. Because these words are almost certainly not in the order the students want to use them, they are again forced to hold them all in their memories rather than simply read them off the board and forget them.

This process of speaking also involves a very important principle in the Silent Way, which is termed "awareness". For the students to learn how to speak, they need to be totally aware of what they do, totally present in it (so that they can internalise and "learn" it). In Gattegno's view, before words appear, there are ideas/inner movements, and learning a language involves finding words and forms that connect with these inner movements and then properly establishing these links. These links, as I understand it, can be most easily put into place when the language situation is real - true to life. The students need to utter words as true as possible so they come nearer to their own experience and more and more divorced from the falsity of the textbook grammar/set sentences. Then they will be naturally learning how to utter such expressions without any pain or effort on their parts or the teacher's.

Gattegno's tools are therefore carefully arranged so the students can talk about what is 100% true for them. The colour/sound charts allow them to play with the sounds separately from the written word. The word charts have a similar role in presenting words not in their correct order. Another Silent Way teaching tool, the rod, is valued for its neutrality as an object, thus allowing the students to use it to symbolise whatever part of their life and experience they are talking about.



Reading the above paragraphs carefully, it will become apparent that, despite the sense of freedom that may be experienced in a Silent Way class, the Silent Way teacher still retains a large amount of control, symbolised very much by the use of the pointer which can restrict the students by controlling their speed of speech and what they say, word by word, or at times sound by sound. What has happened is that the teacher's control has become much more focussed than in a traditional lesson. The students are quite literally pinpointed to a particular word or sound, and are not allowed to escape. It may be an uncomfortable position, but it does enable the students to work on those tiny aspects of language which can get completely submerged in the larger reference points of the more traditional class.

However, the control of subject matter - the emphasis on "real" situations - inevitably restricts the type of language that is elicited, and any attempts to play with the language imaginatively, thus limiting the possibility of discovering new ways of expression. Role-plays for example, are frowned upon: if students are involved in a role-play exercise about a restaurant, they may engage in the role-play to a certain extent, but a Silent Way teacher would argue that it is not totally real - they are not in a restaurant, they are not waiter and customer, and, if the lesson is after lunch, they are probably not even hungry. In Silent Way terms this immediately distances them from the language they are practising. However, by ruling out such imaginative exercises the students are also restricted. In the example of the waiter and customer in the restaurant, the teacher could challenge the students' normal ways of expression by asking them to play roles they are not used to, or feeding them information they do not expect, (for example the customer is on a diet/is vegetarian/ has very little money; the waiter is tired/ in a hurry/ new to the job etc), thus giving them good practice in learning to be flexible with their language and their responses as well as delight in discovering and practising an

ability to function in unusual unexpected situation. Keeping the students within "real" situations results in a loss of some of this lightness of play, which seems a pity.

Certainly, the ingenious tools that Caleb Gattegno has devised can really be of use in ambushing students who are stuck in old ways, in encouraging fluency, speed and comprehensibility of speech, and the Silent Way offers some very valuable principles that can be applied in the learning situation. However, especially when taking into consideration that many good non-Silent Way teachers are already putting these principles into practice, to adhere, as some teachers seem to, to the Silent Way methods religiously, casting aside all other aids to learning, perhaps risks a loss of creativity, lightness of touch and flexibility, which would be regrettable.

### **Acknowledgements:**

To Piers Messum (Department of Physiology, University College London) for his unending patience in explaining Gattegno's educational theories; Roslyn Young (Centre de Linguistique Appliquee de Besancon, Universite de Franche-Comte, and leading practitioner of the Silent Way) for her unforgettable seminar on the Silent Way approach; and Kana Oyabu (Foreign Language Institute, Kanazawa University) for her kindness in helping construct the Japanese abstract.

### **Further Reading:**

In The Beginning There Were No Words: The Universe of Babies, Caleb Gattegno, Educational Solutions, 1973